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ABSTRACT

In light of concerns that previous staff development projects did not truly capture life in the classroom, and that there may be a gap between one's previous elementary and current university teaching experiences, a teacher educator used a semester sabbatical to shadow six first-grade teachers in order to inform thinking and practice in teaching young children. The observations took place in six schools, ranging from a small satellite rural school with one teacher per grade level to a racially mixed district drawing students from suburbs and urban housing projects. One teacher was shadowed in each school for 2 to 3 weeks; the balance between participation and observation varied among classrooms. Data obtained through field notes, a daily journal, lesson plans, work samples, and photographs of classroom activities were used to develop classroom profiles. Results revealed three key issues affecting thinking as a teacher educator. The first issue involved six key principles that were identified as fostering engagement in regular classrooms within holistic instructional models: (1) preparation; (2) physical closeness; (3) inherently engaging content; (4) including all voices in classroom activities; (5) paper and pencil structures, such as story wheels; and (6) using a paper trail to more closely monitor engagement. Second, preservice teachers should realize that instruction needs to be learner-centered; teacher intervention is needed to maximize the value of holistic routines. Third, the lack of information texts at appropriate levels contributes to the difficulty of maintaining the balance between instructional content and process. (Contains 19 references.) (KDFB)

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Descending the Tower:
Lessons Learned in a First Grade Classroom

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Ethan was a fairly precocious first grader. His mother was an overly interested parent. When Ethan came home from school one day with tales about this new guy who was helping his teacher, his mother probed, "Who is this guy?"

"I think he's a high school kid," Ethan theorized. "I think he's going to be a teacher."

His mother was a bit puzzled by the description. "Are you sure about that?" she asked him.

"Yes, he's studying to be a teacher," Ethan concluded confidently. Then he added, "He's pretty smart."

"How do you know?" she asked.

Ethan replied, "He seems to be catching on really fast!"

Even though I was more than twenty years removed from my high school days, I was the guy Ethan was describing. I was flattered that he thought I was catching on fast. It had been eleven years since I taught in my own first grade classroom. After three years as a full time graduate student, I spent the last eight years as a teacher educator in the Reading Education Department of the College of Education and Human Services at the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh. My primary responsibility involved the teaching of literacy education courses focused at the early childhood and elementary level for preservice and inservice teachers. During the 1995-96 school year, I chose to descend the ivory tower and return to first grade classrooms. Ethan's classroom was the first stop on my journey back to first grade.

Background

It's a dilemma faced by every teacher educator. The more committed we become to preparing preservice and inservice teachers to practice in their classrooms, the further removed we become from our own experiences teaching in those classrooms. Perhaps because of that reason, a few states required teacher educators to return to the classroom on a regularly scheduled basis (Vogt, 1995); but for many of us, the expectation to return to the classrooms in which we once taught was seldom voiced or encouraged within the university walls (unless it was by those we taught.) There are an increasing number of program structures in teacher education programs from field-based methods courses to professional development schools which now place many teacher educators in constant contact with teachers and students in settings far removed from the insulated ivory tower (Wilmore, 1996). The intensified attention to teacher action research and collaborative scholarship further encourages teacher educators to maintain constant contact with the field (Patterson, Stansell & Lee, 1990; Patterson, Santa, Short & Smith, 1993). In addition, the demands for outreach and service on some campuses have resulted in teacher educators continually working with teachers outside the university walls. Where it is valued, many teacher educators are fairly successful at staying in constant contact with the field.

For me, the dilemma was not resolved simply by being in contact with the field. My concern about the gap between my own elementary classroom and university teaching experiences grew even though I felt I had maintained constant contact with the field. Since 1991, I had been involved in a "Learning Community" program in which cohort groups of preservice teachers enrolled in an integrated block of methods courses while also completing a field-based clinical experience. Instructors of the courses assumed responsibility for supervising the preservice teachers in their field placements. Regularly scheduled meetings brought together university faculty members, preservice teachers and cooperating teachers to discuss important issues and ideas related to the Learning Community program. The structures within my college meant that

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my practice would have to be closely linked to the field and my responsibilities would keep me in constant contact with teachers and students.

This contact was strengthened by a personal commitment to service and outreach involving staff development projects with teachers in the field. Since much of this effort reflected fairly traditional staff development models, I realized that I probably benefitted most from this effort. It continually forced me to try out my message with teacher audiences. Long-term commitments and recurring invitations to work with teachers led me to believe that my thinking about issues and ideas related to classroom practices were aligned with what teachers needed. It confirmed for me that my content was current, credible and appropriate for preservice teachers. Fortunately, I was also invited to adopt atypical models for my outreach efforts. One such model was an in-school residency. With four different districts over the past five years, I was invited to stay for extended blocks of time with the expectation that I would model teach in district classrooms with existing students. Teachers were released to observe these model lessons. We were given time to debrief and discuss what was seen and to develop and plan for future efforts in their classrooms. In some districts, the modeling was done in a single classroom over consecutive days. In other districts, the modeling was done in different classrooms on different days. Again I realized that working with teachers and students in real classrooms was something that informed my thinking and enhanced my practice, perhaps more so than the thinking and practice of teachers who were observing me.

This contact was further maintained by volunteering my time in classrooms with inservice teachers with whom I had worked as graduate students. These classrooms became collaborative learning contexts as we explored together integrated thematic instruction, journal writing with emergent writers, reading and writing workshop approaches and other new ways of thinking about teaching and learning in reading and writing programs. I also volunteered my time with professional organizations serving on the executive boards of both the state reading and early childhood organizations. This provided yet other dimensions and perspectives for staying in contact with the field.

I share this autobiographical information to point out that contact with the field was not an issue for me. I was able to maintain constant contact with the field. I sought, enjoyed and benefitted from it. But I was concerned my contact with the field was too abbreviated. It provided snapshots of life in the classroom, but didn't capture a sense of what that life was really like. It seemed like the only way to get a sense of that was to return to the classroom.

Returning to the classroom has become an increasingly popular way for teacher educators to do research (Baumann, 1996). Unfortunately, I encountered personal and professional constraints in securing my own classroom. I decided that the second best way to get a sense of life in the classroom was to shadow classroom teachers. I proposed a semester sabbatical which would allow me time and resources to do that. I planned to arrive when the classroom teacher arrived in the morning and leave when the classroom teacher left at the end of the day. While some teacher educators returned to the classroom quite focused in their purpose (Reutzel & Cooter, 1990), others seemed to do it as a way of generally informing their own thinking and practice (Fitzgerald, 1996). I felt the latter goal would be more appropriate for my study. For a one semester period beginning in September 1995, I began shadowing first grade teachers to study how I could inform my own thinking and practice as a teacher educator rediscovering what

life was like in these classroom settings.

The Contexts

The study was conducted in six different school sites. I decided shadowing multiple teachers in a variety of contexts might be more valuable for me than staying with the same teacher and context. The six school sites included four area school districts, one instate metropolitan district and one out-of-state metropolitan district. Wright, Carver and Ethel Elementary Schools were fairly typical schools in the geographic area surrounding the university. They served fairly homogenous populations of the white middle class neighborhoods from which they drew their students. Puhl Elementary was a small satellite rural school with only one teacher per grade level drawing its student population from the farming communities that bordered the school. Threewinds School was a large K-3 building of a racially mixed district that drew two-thirds of its students from the suburban neighborhoods surrounding the school and one-third of its students from the urban housing projects. Street School was a specialty school in an urban district that served primarily African American students from the surrounding neighborhood. [Since the nature of my shadowing experience at Street School was slightly different from the other experiences (multiple classrooms, multiple teachers, primarily an observer role), this paper will focus on the other shadowing experiences.]

I selected one teacher to shadow in each of the schools. All teachers accepted my invitations to be shadowed. Each had been a graduate student of mine for at least one semester. Four of the teachers had taken a graduate course with me entitled "Whole Language: Issues and Ideas." I had previously worked in the classrooms of two teachers. All of these teachers aligned themselves with more of a holistic philosophy of reading/writing instruction. These were all teachers with whom I had a comfortable working relationship. From what I had observed about their teaching practices, I felt these would be good contexts for me to reexperience classroom life. I felt I could inform my thinking and practice by spending time in these settings.

The teachers were all women. One teacher was an Asian American. The other teachers were white. All were married. Three had children and one was expecting her first child. They ranged in experience: three had taught less than ten years, one was in her eleventh year of teaching and one had taught twenty years. All five teachers had completed masters degrees. They had assumed leadership roles within their districts and in other professional settings.

I was able to spend 2-3 weeks with each teacher. I met with each teacher prior to the initiation of our time together. I let the teacher define my role in the classroom. In almost all cases, I was more of a participant than an observer. Sometimes I observed the teacher, sometimes she observed me, sometimes we taught together and sometimes we taught concurrently. I worked with individual students, small groups and large groups. I implemented lessons I had planned and co-planned, as well as some that were planned for me. I focused primarily on reading and writing instruction but was involved in instruction in the other content areas especially with integrated thematic instruction in some classrooms. I attended opening houses, special needs staffings, grade level meetings, building inservices, and special events. I helped with recess duty and lunchroom patrol. Generally, I tried to follow the teacher through the day doing whatever she had to do or what she wanted me to do.

I took field notes throughout the day and debriefed with the teacher at the end of the day

or during other free periods. I wrote a daily reflective entry in an ongoing journal throughout the experience. I wrote and saved instructional lesson plans for which I was directly responsible. I collected lesson plans, sample materials and other teaching artifacts from each of the classroom teachers. I collected samples and examples of work from students in each classroom. I took photographs and slides of classroom activities. These data sources were used to develop case profiles of each classroom experience. These profiles were analyzed to identify key issues which were impacting on my thinking as a teacher educator. Three critical issues emerged early in the experience: engagement, intervention and balance. As the study progressed, I began to focus my attention on these three issues looking at what I could learn from subsequent classroom experiences to provide additional insights and ideas for me. The balance of this paper examines those three areas of inquiry and how this self-study informed my thinking and improved my practice as a teacher educator.

Issue #1 Engagement

As a teacher educator who embraced holistic practices after leaving my own classroom, I was interested in knowing how first grade teachers who had embraced a similar philosophy operationalized those beliefs in their daily classroom routines. In a relatively short period of time after returning to first grade, I realized the philosophy a teacher embraced was a moot point if relatively few students were paying attention while she implemented it. Perhaps I had forgotten what six-year old children were like in the fall. I found myself thinking about the carnival midway game called "Wac-a-mole" where the object was to beat down the heads of as many moles as possible as they popped up in a case full of holes. It seemed like as soon as a teacher had quieted down a few children on one side of the room, children on the other side of the room needed attention. I remembered suggesting to Kerry, the teacher I shadowed first at Wright Elementary School, that perhaps it would be easier if we sent half of her group of twenty-four first graders home for four hours and worked with those that remained. Then we could send the others home and work with the other half when they came back. I was convinced that we would accomplish more by working with half the room for half the day than working with the whole room for the whole day.

While some researchers have conceptualized "engagement" as a sophisticated involvement with text, others have viewed it in general terms of motivational factors from which to structure classroom practices (Guthrie, 1996). I realized that engagement needed to be conceptualized in a "ground level" manner. I thought again about the idea of "academically engaged" time -- the need to maximize the time all students are actively engaged during instruction (Carnine, Silbert & Kameenui, 1997). As a teacher educator, I know that much of what I teach my students about philosophy, beliefs and theories is primarily valuable only in its ability to be translated in classrooms where learners are also actively engaged in the learning process. Despite my own concerns about behavioristic models of instruction, I had sensed the attraction preservice teachers had to Direct Instruction models discussed in other courses which provided them with frameworks for keeping all students on task and attending to the lessons. From my own experiences, however, I knew that engaging students meant more than keeping them busy with a thick packet of worksheets or directing their behavior every step of the way during the instruction (Ford, 1991). On the other hand, I could sense my growing attraction to quality one-to-one

intervention provided in programs like Reading Recovery (Clay, 1993a) where children did not seem to have one minute of disengaged time during their tutorial period. Since I truly believed that in order for students to become readers and writers they must be actively engaged in the reading and writing processes (Cambourne, 1995), I began to wonder how such engagement could be achieved in regular classrooms within more holistic models of instruction? I began to wonder how any teacher could keep twenty-four six-year olds engaged?

Working with my teacher collaborators, we began to study the students and try to determine under which conditions they seemed to be most engaged in learning. We knew from Cambourne's work, it began with the students sensing they could have success with the activity and that they would value the outcome. We knew that the activities would have to take place in an environment in which they felt safe and were willing to take risks. But we continued to wonder what other conditions would seem to make this formula work? I began to carefully observe and monitor my instruction to sense when the students were most engaged. Because of these classroom experiences, I was able to identify six key principles for fostering engagement with young children. I now share these principles with the preservice and inservice teachers with whom I work.

First, I rediscovered the value of preparation. I saw that when holistic routines were internalized so well that teachers could perform them in their sleep, they often sleepwalked through them. Sitting through large chunks of instruction for an eventual possible chance to respond, students often began to disengage from the process. I jokingly suggested that sometimes their imaginary friends seemed to be more on task than they were. I thought about how lengthy, large group activities could be structured to invite student interaction and response along the way and realized that careful preparation was one essential ingredient. Secondly, I observed the importance of physical closeness. Engagement seemed to be greater in smaller groups or when the teacher was able to be a close physical presence in large groups. I looked at how teachers avoided being trapped in front of a large group and the advantage of being able to roam and interact with all students. Third, I noticed how content seemed to be inherently engaging for many students. I reexamined the value of nonfiction and the integration of concrete real-world experiences within the reading-writing program. Students seemed very interested when content was related to known (and little known) life experiences. Fourth, I worked to include all voices in the classroom activities. I discovered a number of techniques using choral, partner and random responses to invite all students into the learning activity. This equalized children's voices and the contributions they made to class activities. Fifth, I experimented with simple paper and pencil structures, like box grids and story wheels, to promote levels of engagement while students worked on reading, processing and responding to texts. Finally, structures like those and other tools allowed me to more closely monitor the engagement. They created a paper trail which we could use to inform subsequent decisions about assessment and instruction.

As a teacher educator, I now talk about the need to "tighten up" holistic practices to offer greater assurance that all students -- especially those who need them the most -- are benefitting from the experiences we are providing for them (Ford, 1996). I use to say, "Trust the process and trust the learner." After returning to first grade classrooms, I now add, "But monitor both very carefully."

Issue #2 Intervention

One afternoon, Kerry, the first grade teacher I was shadowing at Wright Elementary, was working diligently with Matthew. Matthew, a struggling reader and writer, was trying to complete a fill-in-the-blank story to be displayed during an open house. Kerry worked with Matthew to fill in each line. They came to the line that said, "My favorite part of school is _____." Matthew selected "recess" from the long list of possible answers brainstormed by the class. Kerry worked to help Matthew spell the word sound-by-sound, letter-by-letter. When they came to the end of the word, Kerry said, "Now listen, Matthew. Recesssssssss, Recesssssssss, sssssssss . . . what sound do you hear at the end of recess?"

Matthew looked up and said, "The bell?"

In the same classroom sitting just a few rows over from Matthew was Jeanne. She was busy writing in her journal. She wrote, "My fart food is fachn." which many first grade teachers could quickly translate as, "My favorite food is fettucini."

Again, one did not have to be in a first grade classroom very long to be reminded of the wide gaps between children. Here were two children, in the same classroom, about the same age, from the same neighborhood. One had a fairly sophisticated level of phonemic and print awareness. The other was just beginning to realize these concepts. I could offer endless examples of the differences between students in these classrooms on many different dimensions. As a teacher educator, I saw the importance of getting preservice teachers to realize that their instruction needs to be learner-centered. In teacher preparation, preservice teachers were often taught to teach lessons, materials, methods, and/or programs. When preservice teachers considered the increasing differences in the students they would be asked to serve, however, they would realize that one size would not fit all. I concluded preservice teachers needed more help learning how to teach children, not lessons.

Likewise, I saw the need for this focus in my work with inservice teachers. I saw the implementation of classroom practices -- the teaching of lessons -- but often did not see the teaching of children. For example, journal writing was a present force in many classrooms; however the implementation of this routine had very little teacher involvement while it was happening. I could see the adoption of a more holistic practice, but I did not always see teacher invention during the routine. Teacher intervention was critical for maximizing the value of the holistic routine.

Recently, my thinking had been significantly impacted by the work of Clay and the teaching techniques of Reading Recovery. From my time spent in these classrooms, I could see the value in being able to get inside the heads of young readers by conducting running records as they read, analyzing their miscues and structuring response based on that analysis (Clay, 1993b). I developed simple frameworks for thinking about how to respond when what a reader has read is correct, corrected, comprehended, attempted or stalled. I returned to my university classroom committed to placing a greater emphasis on these techniques. I invited investigations by preservice teachers to try these techniques with students in supervised contexts. Similarly, we looked at the need to carefully intervene as young writers were writing. We looked more carefully at intervention techniques which could be used to help writers move from one stage of spelling to the next. We examined frameworks for analyzing the written miscues of children and using that information to plan subsequent instruction (Gentry & Gillet, 1993).

Again, as a teacher educator, I could see that one aspect of tightening up holistic instruction was shifting the focus away from lessons and more toward learners. Looking at learners revealed the need to be ready to respond to individuals. This would require intervention -- getting inside the student's head and helping the student to construct new knowledge in response to their needs at that moment in time. After returning to first grade classrooms, teaching preservice and inservice to see instruction in this way became a critical goal for me.

Issue #3 Balance

One of the most difficult tasks articulated by some first grade teachers with whom I worked was finding the balance between content and process when working with young children. In some cases, the integrated language arts program of the classroom teacher consumed so much of the scheduled day that the serious exploration of content in social studies, science and other subject areas was relegated to a relatively short period of time at the end of the day (Haberman, 1989). The argument often offered was that the primary goal of the first grade teacher was to help students become readers and writers. That was how they should concentrate most of their time. At the same time, embracing a more holistic philosophy seemed to suggest the importance of integrating the language arts into the content areas (Pearson, 1989). Believing this, many first grade teachers adopted models of integrated thematic instruction to organize blocks of time in their classrooms. In some of these classrooms, the focus on content supplanted the time spent on learning how to read and write. More systematic reading and writing instruction seemed to get lost in the study of the thematic topic.

In returning to first grade classrooms, what became apparent to me was the role that materials (or rather the lack of materials) often played in causing the imbalance between process and content instruction. Finding appropriate informational text at levels that were appropriate for young readers was very difficult. Without texts that could be used to help students become stronger readers and writers while they also learned about content, teachers often relied on large group activities, such as shared reading and writing, as the primary instructional techniques used in thematic instruction. Students received little instruction in small groups or individually. Many of the materials made available to the students were also too difficult for them to read independently as vehicles for improving their own reading strategies.

We started to discuss this in trying to address the issue of balance. In observing these teachers, I saw some ways they addressed this problem. Teachers that used broader themes (e.g., farm animals) were able to find a variety of material that could be read by different levels of readers as they learned about content. This was more difficult to achieve if the teacher focused on a narrower theme. Teachers also used unique resources to add to the repertoire of reading materials available to readers during the theme. These included commercially available blackline master little books which provided patterned readers that revealed content in their texts and illustrations. Linda, from Publ Elementary School, used lyrics from piggyback songs (common songs rewritten with thematic lyrics that revealed content) as shared reading materials that could be used in top down reading lessons. Many of the teachers created appropriate materials. It was quite clear that as more material becomes available to support content themes in primary classrooms with emerging readers and writers, the issue of balance will become easier to address.

Until that time, as a teacher educator, I saw the need to share models that help preservice

teachers plan themes that incorporate core language experiences around significant content. Strickland's (1989) model reminded teachers to consider six experiences in planning integrated instruction: shared reading and writing, read alouds, independent reading, independent writing, inquiry activities and sharing. After visiting first grade classrooms, I saw the importance of models like this that asked teachers to consider the balance between process and content as they planned thematic instruction. Again, this seemed to be one more additional way to tighten up instruction in holistic settings to insure that it was effectively meeting the needs of all children.

Lessons Learned

I once heard a speaker say in describing his own scholarship, "I am my best experiment." It is the way I now describe my own scholarship. I study my own practice. Since teaching has consumed my life for almost nineteen years, it warrants my attention. While I have turned the lens inward on much of my research, I do realize -- hope -- my teaching impacts on someone other than myself. While I like to say that my classes are preparation for life, I know that most who take my classes are more interested in preparing for life in classrooms. If I acknowledge this, then I know that my teaching needs to be informed by more than a distant memory of what life in classrooms was like for me. That's why I proposed this sabbatical. I wasn't concerned about my contact with the field. I wasn't even concerned about my credibility as a teacher. I have four classrooms every semester. If I can't establish my credibility as a classroom teacher by the way I teach in my own classrooms, I doubt whether I could do it by teaching in someone else's classroom. But I was concerned about truly remembering what life in classrooms was like. In the decade since I left my classroom, much has changed (Elkind, 1996). I decided returning was the best way to discover as much as I could about those changes. What I learned can be summarized in two words, "Tighten up!" After my experience, I was ready to take a look at what I had been sharing with preservice and inservice teachers and to make changes helping them to see the need to consider the issues of engagement, intervention and balance in their own classrooms.

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